The cultural politics of the New Criticism

Mark Jancovich

Department of American Studies,
University of Keele

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1993

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Jancovich, Mark.
The cultural politics of the New Criticism/Mark Jancovich.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 41652 3 hardback
1. Criticism – United States – History – 20th century. 2. American literature – History and criticism – Theory, etc. 3. Ransom, John Crowe, 1888–1974 – Knowledge – Literature. 4. Warren, Robert Penn, 1905– – Knowledge – Literature. 5. Tate, Allen, 1899– – Knowledge – Literature. 6. Politics and literature – United States. 7. New Criticism – United States. I. Title.
PS78.J35 1993
801'.95'09739041 – dc20 93–19909 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41652 3 hardback

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1 Contemporary responses to the New Criticism

In his book, *After the New Criticism*, Frank Lentricchia attempts to counter 'two misleading perspectives' which may be suggested by his book's title. He argues that the New Criticism was never a monolithic entity; and that the period defined by the title is not one distinguished by the absence of the New Criticism, but, in a very important sense, one which is distinguished by its presence. In the case of the first argument, he describes the New Criticism as 'an inconsistent and sometimes confused movement'. Unfortunately, while he does acknowledge real differences within the movement, he regards these as the result of weakness or a lack of clarity, rather than the disagreements and discussions which are present in any critical discourse. Lentricchia fails to acknowledge that the social organization of the New Criticism was very different from that of contemporary criticism – at least in its early stages. While the New Critics did share a common reaction against previous forms of criticism, and while they relied on similar intellectual traditions, their social organization was largely that of an informal group which only began to formalize itself in an attempt to reorganize the teaching of English in America. Contemporary criticism, on the other hand, is defined within specific institutional and theoretical structures which tend to make it far more monolithic.

This situation is also related to Lentricchia's second argument. The institutional and theoretical structures of contemporary criticism are part of the legacy of the New Criticism:

> If my title suggests, then, that the New Criticism is dead – in an official sense, of course, it is – I must stipulate that in my view it is dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead. I find many traces (perhaps 'scars' is the word) of the New Criticism and of nineteenth century thought in the fixed and identifiable positions we have come to know as contemporary theory. Such traces or scars produce, in turn, another effect, not easy to discern: an intertextual mingling among contemporary theorists. I am arguing not only that the ruptures separating nineteenth-century aesthetic traditions, the New Criticism, and contemporary theories are not absolute but also that the differences among contemporary theories are not clean discontinuities. In my opinion it is the very condition of contemporary critical historicity that there is no 'after' or 'before' the New

Criticism: no absolute presence *in the present* means that the present is opened up to the 'drift from the other ends of time'.[1]

In this passage, Lentricchia does acknowledge that contemporary criticism is defined in relation to the New Criticism, but he obscures the continuities between the two. Contemporary theorists have often misrepresented the positions of the New Criticism, and the extent to which it defines their own activities. They have often failed to acknowledge its specific strengths, while reproducing many of its problems. In fact, Lentricchia himself makes this mistake in relation to the issue of history. He argues that one of the legacies of the New Criticism is the 'denial of history' in contemporary theory:

> The traces of the New Criticism are found in yet another way: in the repeated and often extremely subtle denial of history by a variety of contemporary theorists. The exploration and critique of this evasive antihistorical maneuver is one of my fundamental concerns.[2]

One of my own fundamental concerns is to illustrate that while this denial is part of the legacy of the New Criticism, it is the result of a misrepresentation of the New Criticism and the way in which it defined literary activity. Contemporary critics have argued both that the New Criticism maintained that literary activity was completely autonomous from other activities, and that the New Criticism failed to account for the autonomy of signifying practice. In both instances, these critics have misrepresented the ways in which the New Criticism defined the relationship between literature and other forms of social and cultural activity.

It is also interesting that Lentricchia never tackles the New Criticism itself. Instead his book offers a succession of highly interesting readings of the critical movements which rapidly followed each other after 1957, the year which Lentricchia regards as the end of the New Criticism and the beginning of its aftermath. However, one of the questions which is raised by Lentricchia's book, and by Eagleton's discussion of it in his article, 'The Idealism of American Criticism',[3] is whether this moment in 1957 (which is identified with the publication of Northrop Frye's book, *The Anatomy of Criticism*)[4] was actually the moment at which many of the myths associated with the New Criticism were generated. Both writers argue that Frye was concerned with a critique of the New Criticism, and that he claimed that literary analysis should concentrate on literary and mythological systems, rather than on the study of the individual text, a practice which he identified with the New Criticism. They also maintain that Frye's book introduced a whole series of concerns which would be central to contemporary criticism. In fact, Eagleton attempts to identify a proto-

structuralist conception of desire in Frye's criticism. For this reason, Frye's criticism can be regarded as the moment at which the New Criticism was identified with the formalist study of an individual, autonomous text which was displaced from any sense of context. It can also be regarded as the moment when the literary context (or that which is 'beyond formalism' as Geoffery Hartman refers to it)[5] was identified with unconscious processes of desire and structuration, processes which were defined as both global and ahistorical: it is therefore interesting that Hartman's *Beyond Formalism* begins with an enthusiastic defence of Frye's criticism.

The misinterpretations of the New Criticism found in Lentricchia and Eagleton are only part of a far more general tendency within contemporary criticism. It has become commonplace for critics to claim that the New Critics distinguished the text from what Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to as the 'Intentional' and the 'Affective' fallacies,[6] and that this meant that it was a form of bourgeois individualism and/or scientific positivism. It is argued that Wimsatt and Beardsley's position – which is close to that of Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Poetry*[7] – regards the individual text as a fixed object which bears no relation to its conditions of production or consumption. As a result, the New Criticism is supposed to have claimed that the literary critic should only be concerned with the interpretation of individual works. Unfortunately, the New Critics did not define the text as a fixed object which was completely autonomous from the contexts within which it was produced and consumed. On the contrary, they recognized that the production and consumption of texts were only moments within broader cultural processes. Their position was that if students were to be taught to understand the workings of these broader processes, it was necessary to focus their attention on the texts which mediated between the contexts of production and consumption. For the New Critics, the critic should concentrate on the formal processes of texts, formal processes within which both the intentions of the author and the responses of the reader were framed. None the less, they were well aware that their attempt to concentrate on the text as that which mediates between the contexts of production and consumption was itself problematic. The text as such never exists as an independent object, but, as Wimsatt and Beardsley stress, it is always an ideal construction.

Despite this there is general agreement that the New Criticism saw the individual text as an objective, self-sufficient object, but contemporary critics have come to different conclusions as to what this position might mean and what is wrong with it. It is generally agreed that the New Criticism was associated with the practice of close reading, and that, as Eagleton and others have argued, this practice did 'more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather

than to something else: to the "words on the page" rather than to the contexts which produced and surrounded them'.[8] But there is considerable argument as to which contexts are appropriate to the study of literature. For example, while some contemporary critics have accused the New Criticism of isolating the literary text from society and history, others claim that it did not go far enough in this direction; that it failed to identify the autonomy of literary activity. In fact, these criticisms can be present in the same writer. Eagleton, for example, argues that the New Critics separated literature from its social and historical context:

> Rescuing the text from author and reader went hand in hand with disentangling it from any social or historical context. One needed, to be sure, to know what the poem's words would have meant to their original readers, but this fairly technical sort of historical knowledge was the only kind permitted. Literature was a solution to social problems, not a part of them; the poem must be plucked free of the wreckage of history and hoisted into a sublime space above it.[9]

Eagleton accuses the New Critics of seeing literature as an autonomous activity, but his own criticism draws on post-structuralist theory and also seeks to defend the autonomy of literary activity. He is highly critical of those who see literature as a simple reflection or expression of either authorial intention or its social or historical context. As a result, he repeats many of the theoretical manoeuvres which he criticizes in the New Criticism. He is also quite simply wrong to claim that the New Critics saw literary forms as merely a solution to social problems, and not as a product of them.

In fact, the American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson acknowledges many of the similarities between the New Criticism and post-structuralism. He argues that they share a concern to disentangle 'the literary system from other extrinsic systems'.[10] For Jameson, the strength of both the New Criticism and contemporary post-structuralism is that they challenge 'diachronic' theories of language and literature, theories which see texts as the reflection or expression of an author or a social and historical context. He does see a difference between the two critical movements, but claims that it lies in a failure on the part of the New Critics to reject 'the tendency to resolve the literary work into a single technique or a single psychological impulse'.[11] This criticism is directed against the New Critical theory of the organic nature of the literary text, but it misses the point that, for the New Critics, the literary text was an organic whole specifically because it could not be resolved into any one element or feature. It was a complex system of interrelated elements.

The issue of literary autonomy is a problem for Marxist critics such as Eagleton and Jameson though. Like the New Critics themselves, while they wanted to emphasize the 'relative' autonomy of literature in opposition to

those who see it as a simple expression of social and political forces, they are still concerned to emphasize that culture is related to these forces. Their problem is that post-structuralism has a tendency to isolate literary activity from society and history and define it as 'a system with its own order', a system which can only be understood in terms of its internal organization rather than in its relation to other social activities. This tendency was already present in the work of Frye, and it has two aspects: it challenges representational theories of language and literature; and it defines literature as a system with its own rules, a system which is 'autonomous' from other activities.

The first aspect is particularly significant given that many critics have attacked the New Criticism by claiming that it devalued representational and realist types of literature,[12] or that it denies that literature can offer any form of knowledge. This latter position can be found in the work of Robert Scholes. For example, he argues:

> Both Formalist and New Critical schools of criticism tend to deny literary texts any cognitive quality. In terms of the model of communication we are working with, this means denying the access to any context beyond their own verbal system or other texts that share that system.[13]

In fact, the New Critics did not devalue 'realist' types of literature in quite the way that is often claimed. Robert Penn Warren, in particular, was a defender of Theodore Dreiser. What they rejected were those types of writing that Lukacs described as 'naturalism', writing which concentrated on the surface details of social reality rather than on the social processes which produced those surface details. Nor did they deny that literature offered a form of knowledge or cognition. On the contrary, their project was specifically to define literature as a form of knowledge, but one which was defined in opposition to the form of knowledge offered by scientific positivism. It was for this reason that one of Allen Tate's major New Critical essays is entitled 'Literature as Knowledge'. The irony of this situation is that it is post-structuralist critics who have been most instrumental in devaluing representational and realist types of writing. For many such as Catherine Belsey, Terence Hawkes, and even Eagleton, realism is seen as an ideological form which is opposed to a truly revolutionary avant-garde. The notion that language can represent a pre-existing reality is seen as that which must be challenged. They argue that language does not offer us knowledge about a pre-existing world, but structures not only the ways in which we think, but also the objects about which we think.

For these reasons, the most common complaint is not that the New Criticism isolated literature from its social and historical context, but that

the practice of close reading concentrates on individual texts in isolation from the context of the 'autonomous' literary system. This criticism has a strong line of continuity with the work of Frye who maintained that the literary critic should not concentrate on the individual text, but on the literary and mythological systems within which these texts were produced, and it can be identified in Robert Scholes' comparison between the Russian Formalists and the New Critics:

> The Formalists differed from the New Critics, however, in their extreme interest in devices and conventions of poetic structure. They always sought the poetic in poetry and the prosaic in prose, so that even their studies of individual texts always came to turn on a point of poetic principle that could be applied to other texts in the same genre. Thus, their interpretive strategies tended to move from an emphasis on texts to an emphasis on the codes that govern the production of texts.[14]

It is difficult to see what books such as *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* are seeking to do, if not to identify 'the poetic in poetry' and 'the prosaic in prose'; to say nothing of 'the literariness of literature'. None the less, Scholes claims that it was the New Critics' concentration on individual 'works' of literature, rather than 'textuality' or the system of literary codes, which made it successful. It is argued that their supposed avoidance of the unconscious structures within which texts are constructed meant that they offered no challenge to empiricist assumptions.

A similar position is developed by Jonathan Culler, but he takes it one stage further. For Culler, the practice of close reading which he associates with the New Critics not only fails to analyse the literary system, but as a result, regards the process of reading as natural and unproblematic. It fails to recognize that the activity of reading is also dependent upon the literary system.[15] This argument is similar to earlier criticisms, but it is also part of a general shift in focus within theory away from the analysis of the literary system to a critique of the process of interpretation itself. Writers such as Stanley Fish and David Bleich, for example, have argued that there is no 'meaning' to a text prior to the act of interpretation, but that different groups of readers bring different 'interpretive strategies' to bear on texts. These groups construct texts in different ways depending on these different strategies, and no approach is more 'true' to the text than any other.[16]

While this position might lead to mere relativism, the critique of interpretation becomes a political project for some post-structuralist critics such as Terence Hawkes. For Hawkes, the practice of close reading depends upon the assumption that the subject and the object of study – the reader and the text – are stable and independent forms, rather than products of the unconscious process of signification, an assumption which he identifies as the ideology of liberal humanism. This ideological position

is attributed to the New Critics who are accused of attempting to disguise the interests at work in their critical processes. Despite these claims, it was central to the New Critical project that they recognized that the process of reading was not natural. This was the reason they saw literary education as important. They wanted to counter the forms of reading and culture produced by the rationalism of industrial capitalism, and to train the student in an alternative form of reading which would challenge the values of bourgeois society. They were not concerned to disguise their interests, but to present and justify them to the student. It should also be clear from this description that they did not adhere to the principles of liberal humanism, but were opposed to them.

Hawkes is not simply stressing that the reader inevitably brings certain values to the critical process though. He is arguing that language is such a complex process of interrelations that the 'meaning' of any text is always in process; that any attempt to identify a 'unity' or 'meaning' within the text is an act of violence which represses the 'productivity of language'. This violence is also associated with the New Criticism which, for Hawkes,

> forms part of what Barthes dismisses as 'dishonest' criticism, based on the assumption that the work criticized exists in some objective concrete way *before* the critical act; that, however complex or ambiguous it may be, it can ultimately be reduced to a univocal 'content' beyond which it is improper to go.[17]

By contrast, Hawkes argues that the critical process should not be presented as the analysis of an objective text but a process of creativity in which the critic '*creates* the finished work by his reading of it, and does not remain simply an inert *consumer* of a "ready-made" product'.[18]

There are a number of problems with this position though. First, Hawkes implies that the absence of an objective text prior to the critical act means that all readings are equally valid: 'None of these readings is *wrong*, they all add to the work. So a work of literature ultimately consists of *everything* that has been said about it.'[19] But such a suggestion misrepresents his own position. Not only does he have no problem identifying a difference between 'realist' texts by writers such as Tolstoy and 'avant-garde' texts by writers such as James Joyce, but he would also maintain that any attempt to read the latter as a representational narrative would be inappropriate or wrong – if only because it violated the 'productivity of language'. Second, while he may be right that the significance of a text is related to the way in which it has been read, these readings may misrepresent the text and its conditions of production. In fact, the New Criticism itself is an example of this situation. Certainly its significance is related to the way in which contemporary critics have reacted against a certain interpretation of it, but it is still the case that this

reaction by contemporary critics is based on a misrepresentation of the movement and the context within which it was produced. This problem also relates to the third and final one. The identification of a 'unity' or 'meaning' in a text does not reduce one to the status of a simple 'consumer'. The New Critics themselves were careful to stress that the 'unity' or 'meaning' of a text was a complex series of interrelations which required the reader to think through the issues, not accept or reject a specific conclusion. In fact, the New Critics' references to 'the heresy of paraphrase' – which are often seen as sealing the text off from its context – actually meant that the meaning of a text could never be resolved into a 'univocal content'; that it was an endlessly productive process.[20]